

TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO INDEPENDENCE – 50TH ANNIVERSARY

Saturday, August 25, 2012

I was asked a simple question. What impact did Dr Eric Williams have on you? In short, what is my recollection of the Doctor?

In 1956, I was attending Scarborough Methodist School in Tobago and that is the year that I sat and won my Government Exhibition. Do not get out your calculators. As you can well imagine, at such a tender age, one knows very little about politics. My biggest preoccupation was passing that exam and winning a full scholarship to the secondary school of my choice. However, I lived on Bacolet Street which is a main thoroughfare that one had to take to get from Scarborough to the far reaches of Tobago like Roxborough or Charlotteville. All the traffic went past my house. I recall vividly the motorcades preparing for the government elections. I had never been aware of politics. This new activity was explained to us children as the birth of a new party called the PNM. When you eavesdropped on adult conversation, all you heard about was a man they called the Doc and the PNM.

My brothers and I attended Scarborough Methodist because my grand-father had been the head-master of the school in times gone by. As it happened the school was next door to the house of one Mr Robinson. We used to go there and wait for my dad to pick us up from school. I was aware that his young son, Ray, a lawyer, newly returned from England, with a practice in Scarborough, and his older brother whom everyone called McComie, were involved in this new movement. Suddenly, everyday people were becoming prominent. Ray came to be known more formally as ANR as time went by. Fast forward, I won my exhibition and was sent to Trinidad to attend Bishop Anstey High School. There I learned that Woodford Square had been rebaptised the University of Woodford Square, a place where adults took children at night to hear the Doc.

The election came and went and there was a new sheriff in town, Dr Eric Williams. As a child, one of the first political expressions that I picked up was his simple pronouncement – Massa Day Done. Those words were on everybody's lips. Like my people, with a penchant for nuance, we used it however it suited us. Sometimes, people, even us kids, would say massa day done to get out of obligations. I am in charge now, you can't tell me what to do. It was a chant on the playground. We did understand though the deeper meaning, that a new era had begun and we were to become masters of our own destiny.

At this time, my political awareness began to grow. You could not live in Trinidad and Tobago and miss the significance of the West Indies Federation. I was aware that all these

representatives of other islands were living in Trinidad, the seat of the Federation. Some of their children were attending High School with me. The break-up of the Federation made an impression on me largely because of Dr Williams' mathematically brilliant explanation – worthy of Pythagoras no less – when he concluded that one from ten leaves nought. Children who couldn't care less about politics were struck by the brilliance of his explanation and we recited it with biblical reverence. I am sure you are all aware of how that came about. There were ten islands in the Federation. British Guiana (B.G.) and British Honduras, now Belize, were not a part of the Federation. The economic burden was being shouldered mainly by Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago. Norman Manley was Prime Minister of Jamaica. However, his cousin, Alexander Bustamante, who was also the leader of the Opposition, forced him to hold a referendum on whether Jamaica should stay in the Federation. Bustamante campaigned to leave and that was the result of the referendum. When it was presented to Eric Williams as a decision that Jamaica would leave the Federation, he knew that Trinidad and Tobago would be left with the burden of financing the alliance and made the tough decision embodied in one from ten leaves nought.

While the Federation was doomed, he was already working on the more important task of self-determination and making a reality of "massa day done" so he proceeded to seek our independence which we attained in 1962. At the same time, he knew that the Caribbean could only be strong if the individual territories came together and had the advantage of critical mass. We were blessed to have great thinkers in the region. Gradually, they came together and formed CARIFTA. This Common Market Union was cemented in 1973 with the signing of the Chaguaramas Treaty and CARIFTA became what we know today as CARICOM, the Caribbean Community, with its headquarters in Georgetown, Guyana. The Caribbean was fortunate to have leaders like Manley, Barrow, Burnham and Williams who wanted to work together to place us on the map.

You may well ask, what has all of this got to do with me? As it happens, I married a gentleman from Guyana and went to live there in 1979. I was hired by the CARICOM Secretariat to lead a regional training project funded by USAID. That is when the teachings of Eric Williams buried in my sub-conscious proved to be a significant foundation for my decision-making. The United States tried to use the Project as leverage to interfere in the politics of Grenada, at that time, led by Maurice Bishop. Bishop was a friend of Fidel Castro and branded a communist. This is when I fully grasped the significance of one from ten leaves nought and massa day done. USAID had to be told in no uncertain terms that we were either all in or all out. They were obnoxious about it but I witnessed first-hand the advantages of critical mass. We all know how that ended – with the invasion of Grenada. What Massa could not accomplish with suasion, he accomplished with the use of force.

Social networking as we know it today did not exist. The medium of communication was the calypso. The teachings and wisdom of Dr Williams were communicated in song. Who does not remember Sparrow's rendition of "The Doctor say to Pay As You Earn"? That was my introduction to the concept of Income Tax. I cannot recall the words of any other Trinidadian political leader being embedded in the consciousness of the population in the way his words touched us. And all we really had was a radio and word of mouth. Strangely, I could quote Winston Churchill as easily as I could quote Shakespeare. Who does not recall Churchill's call to arms – We shall fight them on the beaches etc – we shall never surrender. OR -- The empires of the future are the empires of the mind. AND -- Never, never, never give up. Eric Williams was Churchillian in his pronouncements.

Eric Williams made me aware of the political arena. He made me feel that I was a person of importance. I can still remember his pronouncement at the University of Woodford Square that the future of Trinidad and Tobago was carried in the school bags of every boy and girl in Trinidad and Tobago. I was too young to fully grasp the concept. What was important to me as a child was that he said I was part of the equation, that age or youth, notwithstanding, everyone was important and had to be counted. So, in summary, I was politicised, without knowing it, at an early age, by a man called Dr Eric Williams.

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